

## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Setting standards in homeopathic practice—A pre-audit exploring motivation and expectation for patients attending the Bristol Homeopathic Hospital

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**Objective:** To set a standard of routine goal setting with patients within their package of care at the Bristol Homeopathic Hospital. We hope goal setting will improve communication with our patients and health professional colleagues, focus outcome and improve targeting of problems. We therefore explored motivation for and expectation of hospital attendance from a patient perspective.

**Materials and methods:** Questionnaire based pre-audit survey. The questionnaire was administered to 110 consecutive patients attending outpatients and 20 parents of children attending with asthma and eczema to gain understanding of motivation and expectation and more specific information for two of the commonest conditions.

**Results:** Seventy percent of patients had used some form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), 35% had used homeopathy and only 10% had had specialist homeopathic care, the majority of use being over the counter. The majority of patients had been encouraged by their General Practitioners, themselves and by word of mouth with family and friends. Few patients cited the media as a major influence. “Pull” factors such as “treating the whole person” were given greater emphasis except for parents of children with asthma and eczema for whom “push” factors such as fear of steroid side effects predominated. In the main patient expectations were reasonable with the majority hoping to see improvements in their conditions. A fifth of patients hoped to reduce conventional medications.

**Conclusions:** Patients had used CAM in general but not homeopathy in particular. Encouragement from doctors, self motivation and word of mouth most motivated patients to come and might suggest more direct communication with General Practitioners would be worthwhile. Being treated as a whole person was the most significant motivating factor, with a significant number of patients wishing to reduce medication. Goal setting and direct communication with other healthcare professionals is essential for safety, to focus outcome, and to value the role of homeopathy in a patient’s healthcare. As a result we have set a standard whereby treatment goals are agreed with patients and communicated to referring health care professionals at each outpatient visit. This could be audited. *Homeopathy* (2007) 96, 243–246.

**Keywords:** homeopathy; clinical audit; standards; motivation; goal setting

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## Introduction

Clinical audit “is a quality improvement process that seeks to improve patient care and outcomes through systematic review of care against explicit criteria”. The

homeopathic community is developing explicit criteria or standards against which care can be reviewed. As part of our audit programme we identified the need to set a standard of goal setting with patients within their five-visit 'package of care' at the Bristol Homeopathic Hospital. We hope treatment goals agreed between patient and doctor will improve communication with our patients and health professional colleagues, focus outcome during a package of care and allow improvement in targeted problems to be more clearly demonstrated. We therefore explored motivation and expectation to guide this process and attempt to meet the needs of our patients at the same time as setting realistic goals.

Motivation for complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) use has been explored in different healthcare settings.<sup>1</sup> Factors include anxiety about side effects of treatment and a desire for more holistic treatment. Qualitative research has also identified the desire by some patients to remain independent in the management of their disease and to keep conventional medications to a minimum.<sup>2</sup> One study which included patients attending for homeopathy in an NHS outpatient setting found the reasons for CAM use included 'the emphasis on treating the whole person', 'complementary therapy will be more effective for my problem than orthodox medicine', 'complementary medicine will enable me to take a more active part in maintaining my health' and 'orthodox treatment was not effective for my particular problem'.<sup>3</sup> Homeopathy patients were most strongly influenced by the ineffectiveness of orthodox medicine for their complaints, a fact which was largely accounted for by the chronicity of their complaints. After development of our questionnaire we used information from this study to refine our questions.

### Aims and objectives

- To explore past use of CAM, motivation and expectation in patients attending with a wide range of conditions and a further 20 patients attending with asthma and eczema.
- To inform the process of setting a standard of goal setting with patients at their first visit to improve communication with patients and referring healthcare practitioners, ensure safety and focus outcomes during the package of care.

### Methods

This was a questionnaire based pre-audit survey. Two medical students helped in design as part of the Special Study Component of their medical training. Patients helped with refining of questionnaire after an initial pilot and reference was made to the Vincent and

Furnham study.<sup>3</sup> The questionnaire asked about past use of CAM, who encouraged the patient to visit Bristol Homeopathic Hospital, what made the patient consider using homeopathy and what did they expect would happen as a result of using homeopathy? We aimed to administer the questionnaire to 110 patients with a wide range of conditions and 20 parents of children with asthma and eczema. We obtained verbal consent.

## Results

### Past use of CAM

No one refused consent to complete the questionnaire. Seventy percent of patients had used some sort of CAM previously, and 35% had used homeopathy previously, the majority of use being over the counter. Only 10% had previously accessed specialist homeopathic care. The types of CAM used are shown in Box 1 and reflect a diverse use of CAM. The most common conditions for which patients were referred are set out in Table 1.

### Motivating factors

When asked 'who or what encouraged you to attend the Homeopathic Hospital', 58% of patients said their doctor, with self-motivation the next most common reason given, followed by family member and a friend. Media information motivated just three patients. Free text comments reflected these findings and included "a friend told me about the hospital's existence" and "my GP was happy to recommend me to you". Vincent and Furnham have described "push" and "pull" factors which motivate patients' use of CAM.<sup>3</sup> Push factors include anxiety about side effects of conventional

- ◆ Acupuncture
- ◆ Aloe vera
- ◆ Aromatherapy
- ◆ Bach flower
- ◆ Bowen
- ◆ Chiropractic/osteopathy
- ◆ Creams
- ◆ Essential oils
- ◆ Herbal medicines e.g. Echinacea
- ◆ Mineral and vitamins
- ◆ Reflexology
- ◆ Shiatsu
- ◆ St John's Wort

**Box 1** Types of CAM previously used.

**Table 1** Six most frequent medical conditions of 110 consecutive patients attending Bristol Homeopathic Hospital

Chronic fatigue syndrome	15
Eczema/asthma	10
Irritable bowel syndrome	8
Carcinoma breast	6
Menopausal symptoms	5
Premenstrual syndrome	5

medications, pull factors are aspects of CAM that patients value such as offering a holistic perspective. Previous experiences influence choice both as push and pull factors, eg "it worked well on me as a child" or "my mum has always used homeopathy on me" and "I have arthritis and saw my parents live with severe side effects from conventional medicines". From our data pull factors were given greater endorsement than push factors in the whole population (Box 2). However for parents of children with asthma and eczema push factors predominated with anxiety about the use of steroid treatments motivating all 20 patients.

An interesting motivating factor seen in the free text areas of the questionnaire appears to reflect the desire to look at illness in a more complex way and gain greater understanding which may in turn reflect patient's beliefs systems which motivate them to use holistic care. Four parents described the relationship between stress and an exacerbation of eczema or asthma for their children and wanted an approach that would acknowledge mind-body connections. Examples of patients seeking a more holistic approach to their own or their child's illness is set out in Box 3.

Patients described their experience of conventional medicines as both positive and negative and free text

◆ Value the emphasis on treating the whole person	73%
◆ Prefer natural medicines	70%
◆ Others I know have used them	58%
◆ I hope to improve my condition	53%
◆ I am desperate to improve my condition	44%
◆ I believe homeopathy to be more effective	41%
◆ Conventional medicine has been ineffective	32%
◆ I have experienced negative side effects	30%
◆ Wish to use homeopathy alongside conventional medicine	20%
◆ Need help with side effects of conventional drugs	14%

**Box 2** Motivating factors in order of frequency.

◆ "I want to get to the bottom of the problem"	◆ "Homeopathy may understand and treat my daughter"
◆ "Specialists can find no reason for my symptoms"	◆ "I hope to have more insight into my condition-to shed more light"
◆ "I hope to get to the root of the problem"	◆ Homeopathy can treat and balance my ailments at once
◆ "I want to find the cause"	◆ I want natural healing
◆ I want to feel more balanced	
◆ Conventional medicines deal with symptoms not cause	

**Box 3** The search for a more complex framework of illness. Patients' and parents' free text comments.

comments described decreasing returns with conventional medicine over the longer term, eg 'my condition returns despite regular use of medicine', 'helps for a certain amount of time', 'increased use but get same benefit'.

### Expectation

Patient expectation on the whole was realistic with 87% of the patients endorsing the expectation of some improvement. Twenty-one percent of patients hoped to reduce medication. Fifteen wanted to stop their conventional medication and these patients had eczema, IBS CFS and chronic pain. Those hoping to be cured of their condition had CFS, joint pain, fibromyalgia, psoriasis, eczema and breast cancer.

### Conclusions

Three quarters of this population of patients were already using some form of CAM. However only 10% of patients had previously experienced specialist homeopathic care and therefore how we prepare the patients for their visits and work towards realistic goal setting becomes important. Over the counter use of homeopathic products, although not regarded as the gold standard of specialist homeopathic care, has been found to be the most frequent pattern of use in this audit and of children's use of homeopathic products in the Bristol area.<sup>4</sup> It was interesting to see that pull factors were endorsed more than push factors in motivating patients in general with "treating the whole person" being most endorsed. Parents of children with asthma and eczema were pushed more than pulled with anxiety about the side effects of steroid medication.

The homeopath's desire to understand the individual and find meaning was mirrored in the patients desire to find a greater understanding or meaning for their illness of the illness of their children. Some patients also came with the idea that healing is possible. For patients who want to look at their illness holistically, homeopathic care may provide a very important avenue to access such care within the NHS. Access to homeopathy within the NHS is very topical with

sceptics citing a lack of evidence to justify provision.<sup>5</sup> Patient demand for CAM however continues to increase and in one study, the majority of participants were positive about greater NHS access to complementary therapy services, for enhancing patient choice, improving equality in access for less affluent patients and facilitating patients' self-help.<sup>2</sup>

With expectation of homeopathic care, health beliefs vary from person to person and goal setting becomes very important when expectations are high particularly in the area of serious or life threatening illness such as cancer. It is reassuring that the majority of patients across a range of conditions hoped for improvement rather than cure. Asthma can also be life threatening and conventional asthma medication a very important part of managing patients care. However, this group of patients have a desire to reduce or stop medication where possible and this makes realistic goal setting with our patients and communicating these goals to healthcare professionals essential. The emerging evidence base must of course inform this process of goal setting as does evidence from outcome data nationally within the homeopathic community.<sup>6</sup>

Following this pre-audit survey, we have now set a standard of routine goal setting within the department where treatment goals are agreed with patients and communicated to referring health care professionals at each outpatient visit. This will be audited within the department and could be part of a national audit with collaboration via the five UK homeopathic hospitals. We have recently created the Faculty of Homeopathy's Secondary Care Audit Working Group Party to collaborate across the five UK centres to set standards and develop an audit programme to

improve patient care and offer a "real world" strand of evidence.<sup>6</sup>

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